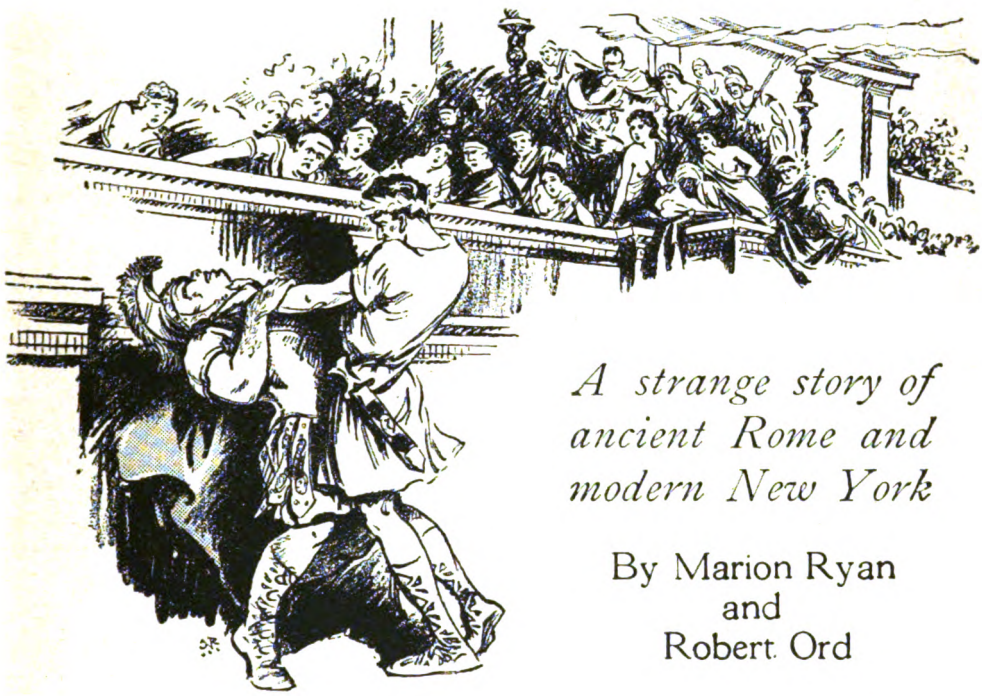
The Heat Wave



A strange story of ancient Rome and modern New York

By Marion Ryan
and
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IT was noon of an August day, and out of a sky of molten lead the sun glared pitilessly down upon the panting city. New York was in the stifling smother of a heat wave such as the oldest inhabitants could not remember having experienced before. The fiery visitation had lasted for several days, and showed no sign of breaking.

Morning after morning the sun rose triumphantly waving golden streamers, to blaze relentlessly through fifteen hours. When at last it subsided into a scarlet bed, the night brought no relief in the heavy pall that closed down upon a gasping people.

Relief organizations were working overtime, extra water carts were flushing the streets. Free deliveries of ice melted away as they were doled out, and electric fans circulated only a sirocco. Prayers for rain were vainly offered in the churches. Men went coatless and collarless, women fainted over their household duties and in the streets or shops, children cried from sheer misery. Paint blistered and peeled in the heat, the grass in the parks and squares was seared and blackened as if by fire, and the leaves of the trees curled up like scraps of tissue paper.

And still the sun blazed down and the pavements blazed back, seeming to scorch the feet that trod on them as the sun scorched people's faces. Listless indeed were those passing feet—almost too listless to shuffle onward, were it not for the terrible urge to get

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somewhere — anywhere — out of the swelter.

It was the luncheon hour, which brought a brief respite from the drudgery of work and the tyranny of authority, both so much magnified in the torturing heat. The weary feet shuffled on, and presently there came among them a firmer, quicker tread. Some one was actually hurrying. Some one, strange to say, still had vitality enough to hurry.

A few of the shufflers turned and looked at Paul Feron as he strode up the avenue. He was a tall, handsome lad in his early twenties. His shoulders were square and straight, his head with its thick, black hair was held high, his broad chest heaved, and his eyes flashed angrily. He was as oblivious of the passers-by as of the fact that he was wearing no hat and that the sun was blazing down mercilessly upon his uncovered head.

A man caught him by the arm.

"What's the matter, buddy? Tired of life? Want to get sunstroke, so as to collect your insurance?"

The youth flung himself away, unseeing, unhearing, with the perspiration streaming down his face as he walked on and on. Only one thing mattered—he was free at last, free by his own act. For the first time since he had been in that unendurable office he felt himself a man again.

No more submission to that swine, Behren! How he loathed the fellow! Paul had not wanted to lose his job, for jobs were hard enough to get; but Behren was more than any one could stand. How they all hated the man, with his mean way of spying on his subordinates, his vile temper, and his cold, cruel insults!

Anyway, Paul was free of it now. What a hellish life it had been! He would not have stood it for all these months if it had not been for Beth. She had been so anxious about ways and means, and they had married on almost nothing but love and hope for the future. Such a pretty little soft thing, Beth, with her great blue eyes! He would endure almost anything for her.

Well, he had endured it for months —all the systematic persecution of himself and those about him, all the sneers of that fat slug with his small round head on his great unwieldy body. That's what Behren was like, by Jove —a great slug! His white face with the beady eyes, his sleek yellow hair, and the roll of flesh at the back of his neck—how Paul Feron had hated them!

Think, too, of the injustice of the petty tyrant! Paul had hardly taken the job before Behren had a knife into him. Anything he did was wrong, even if Mr. Barnes, the other partner, praised it.

If good old Barnes had not been away from town, perhaps the scene of this morning would not have happened. Surely he would not have stood by and watched Behren badger poor little Lou Harding, shaking his fat hand in her funny little face, framed in those great spectacles she wore. Like a madman, the bullying brute was hot one minute and then all of a sudden he became cruel and cold.

Yes, things had certainly come to a head that morning. Lou had been crying over a slight mistake, which had put Behren in a furious rage. Paul Feron had looked on in silent indignation until he could stand it no longer, and then he had told Behren just what he thought of him, two or three different ways. Lord, it was good to get it off his chest!

Behren was so astonished that his fat jaw dropped and his face turned purple before he pulled himself together and hissed to Paul to leave the office at once. Any money due him would be sent to him, and he was not to apply to Behren & Barnes for recommendation. Paul shouted back that he was glad to be fired, and that he would teach Behren to behave himself

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before he finished. Then, somehow, he and Lou had found themselves out of the room, with Behren smiling horribly at them from the door and Lou crying in gasps.

Oh, how hot it was!

He stopped suddenly. He had reached the park, and there was a bench under a tree which invited him to its shade. He flung himself down with legs outstretched and hands hanging. Suddenly he felt terribly, overpoweringly tired.

Well, he had burned his boats. He would have to go home and tell Beth. She would be anxious, naturally, and she would be upset about poor little Lou Harding, too. Of course, Paul had to stand by Lou. Any man would —a thin, miserable scrap of a girl like that, working so hard and getting so little for it!

Beth and Lou—Lou and Beth—and Behren. How Paul hated Behren! How he loathed him and his cruel smile and his fat neck!

II

THE sun swung high in a sky of brass. Its burning rays even penetrated the purple splendor of the gold-fringed awnings over the seventy thousand perspiring people who sat or sprawled on the marble benches, gasping with heat and excitement, their dripping bodies swaying with the motion of the contests below.

The atmosphere was stifling, in spite of the perfumed showers that were projected intermittently over the audience. The stench that rose from the arena, the reek of the wild beasts, and the salty smell of blood, combined with the smothering dust and the sweltering heat, made the place almost insupportable.

The drought had lasted more than three months, and the country was suffering terribly. Fields and vineyards were sun-scorched wastes. In the cities it was worse, and worst of all in Rome, where the Tiber crawled, low and oily, its fetid banks exhaling miasma.

Yet the Colosseum was packed for the celebrations in honor of the emperor's birthday. The populace had been promised a week of unparalleled entertainment, and the empire had been swept from end to end for sensational contributions. The strongest and fiercest lions from Libya had been procured, and a hundred malefactors, gathered from the dungeons of Rome, together with some twenty of the hated Christians, arrested on trumped-up accusations of disloyalty, were to be thrown to them.

He was sitting beside the emperor, his head wreathed with bays placed there by the great Titus himself. Was it only two days ago that he had leaped into the arena when Myrtilla, the beautiful patrician maiden, had challenged the young nobles of Rome to encounter a lion single-handed? It had been a great fight, for the lion was a particularly ferocious brute which had already destroyed three of the emperor's bravest gladiators; but he had killed it, and he had been fêted and flattered ever since.

What a world it was! Only two days ago he was but a simple, unknown youth, albeit of noble blood, and today the excited people had shouted his name — "Ferronius! Ferronius!"— when he entered the emperor's box. This was fame, he supposed; but to him there was something sinister in that great crowd, panting with the heat and its own lust for blood. His glance swept the tiers of men and women anxiously.

Where was Marcellus? As official chief at the Colosseum, he should have been at his post by now.

Many eyes met those of Ferronius as they roved along the benches where lounged senators and magistrates and the fairest women of Rome. There were eyes curious and eager, and eyes soft and languorous; but he ignored them all. Even the alluring glance of

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Myrtilla, who, swathed in gold tissue with yellow lilies in her hair, reclined on the silken cushions near him, failed to thrill him. Perhaps it might have meant more to him were it not for the memory of a flowery hillside and a slender, white-clad figure, a little hand in his, a golden head resting upon his shoulder.

He shivered slightly, and looked around again apprehensively. Marcellus was late, surely! Ah, there at last was the thick, short, glittering figure pressing toward the emperor, while the crowds muttered as he passed; for men feared and hated his power and his cruelty.

Now the manager of the show was bowing before Titus; but why did he not meet the anxious gaze of Ferronius? Surely all must have been arranged as he had agreed! It was not much for Marcellus, with all his power, to accomplish—the removal of just one name from the list of Christians arrested, the smuggling of one slender girl from prison.

Had Ferronius only known what fame would be his for the mere killing of a lion, he would have gone to the emperor himself; but by that time Marcellus had received his bribe. Surely Ferronius had paid the contemptible creature liberally enough! Surely he must in a moment give a reassuring glance!

Ah, there at last he had turned and nodded! All was well. In his small, cold, narrow eyes there was a gleam of something like triumph; but he had nodded. Vedia was safe—golden little Vedia, who, with her hand in her lover's, had told Ferronius of Christ and of the new gospel of peace and mercy. What did it matter what she said, when her voice was so sweet, her eyes so blue? And now she must be safe, back in her home on the hillside, waiting for him to come and take her away. Oh, he would go to-night, as soon as he could get away—Marcellus had nodded!

A roar from the amphitheater brought his thoughts back again. Marcellus had staged a duel between two gladiators who drove into the arena in chariots, and there was a heavy crash as the vehicles came into collision, each driver trying to upset the other. The noise was terrific, with the splitting of wood, as wheels, poles, and other parts of the shattered chariots flew in all directions; the screams of the injured horses, kicking and plunging in the wreckage; the hoarse shouts of the gladiators, on the ground, now, and lunging furiously at each other; and the yells of the audience, thirsting for bloodshed and impatient of the clouds of dust that partially obscured the combatants.

It was not a long fight, for one of the gladiators had been hurt in the collision, and he was brought down by a mighty thrust of his antagonist's heavy sword, which he was too weak to parry. Seventy thousand voices clamored for the death blow as the victor, with one foot on his fallen enemy's chest, flung up the hand that grasped the dripping, questioning sword, and turned toward the emperor.

Before answering, Titus stooped to Myrtilla. Instantly she sprang to her feet, her lovely body gleaming through her golden veil.

"He was a craven!" she cried. "He fought ill!"

A turn of her thumb sent the unfortunate wretch to his end. How like a tigress she seemed as she coiled back on her purple cushions!

As she leaned forward again to smile at Ferronius, a new sound echoed through the vast building—a wild, thunderous roar—the roar of hungry, maddened beasts. At a sign from Marcellus the soldiers had raised the gratings in front of the subterranean dens, and six huge lions had rushed out, fighting, snarling, leaping over one another, tearing up the sand in a murky smother.

They glared at the white faces that

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glared back from the seats above them. Maddened by hunger and by the wild shouts that greeted them, they sprang upon the low wall that separated the arena from the auditorium and clawed and worried the massive bronze railing that surmounted it. The soldiers, hurling missiles at the frenzied brutes, exasperated them to even greater fury. Marcellus stood there laughing, his fat white face distorted, his shoulders shaking.

Then, quite suddenly, he gave a sign. A further gate opened and a score of shivering, stumbling wretches were driven ruthlessly into the arena. Behind them the gate clanged to, and some of the Christians, stricken with panic, turned and clung to its bars, frantically beating at them and screaming in terror.

There followed an indescribable scene—a welter of shrieks and snarls, of struggles and mutilations, as the lions fought over their prey, their fearful, coughing roars mingling with the death cries of their victims and the exultant shouts of the people.

Once again the eyes of Ferronius sought Marcellus. The man was standing there, gloating over the awful pit, with his thick lips hanging moist and red, his small eyes glittering as his head protruded from the roll of fat at the back of his neck—more bestial, Ferronius thought, than the beasts themselves.

"By all the gods," he muttered to himself, "that man is the most loathsome thing in all Rome!"

Even as he murmured, Marcellus met his gaze for an instant. Then, smiling horribly, the director of the show turned and signaled once more to the soldiers.

Again a gate opened, and there, there, to the unutterable horror of Ferronius, was Vedia! She stood alone in the opening, her slender body trembling, but her head bravely erect, though tears were in her eyes and her lips quivered.

For a moment he was paralyzed. He thought that his heart must burst. Then there was a great cry of anguish—was it his?

Vedia heard. She flung out her arms toward him, as he leaped for the railings; but even as he sprang, three of the lions were upon her, and the little white figure was blotted out by their tawny, writhing bodies as they tore at her. One long, quivering scream and it was over.

With that last cry ringing in his ears, Ferronius raced headlong to the gangway and leaped upon Marcellus where he stood, still smiling. No lion more quick or strong than the furious avenger as he pinned the traitor to the wall and seized his loathsome throat with long, sinewy hands—hands whose grip of steel had torn a lion's jaws apart but two days before.

To and fro the two men rocked in a deadly embrace. Marcellus, struggling with the strength of desperation, dealt battering blows at his assailant, but Ferronius never felt them. All the hatred of the world was in his soul, all the passion of the world in his strong hands. He felt only that gross, fat throat into which his fingers were boring.

He never saw the spectators rise from their seats, craning their necks, forgetful of the ravening lions and the little tattered heap of whiteness beaten and trampled into the dust of the arena, as they gaped wildly at the unprecedented sight of a mortal combat waged close to the stately seat of the emperor himself.

He never saw the great Titus raise his hand, and Myrtilla pull it down, her cruel eyes fixed upon the fighters. He saw nothing but that flat, white face so close to his own and turning purple as he gripped the throat of Marcellus with relentless hands.

He did not hear Myrtilla's eager cry:

"Let be! Let be! 'Tis good to watch!"

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He did not hear the yells of the people, the shouts of the soldiers as they threatened him with their swords, yet refrained from striking, in fear of injuring their commander, so tightly were the swirling bodies locked. He did not notice the sobbing, rattling gasps of the man whom he was strangling. He heard nothing but Vedia's last heartbreaking cry.

To and fro over the marble seats they thrashed and swung. At length the purple face was turning black and the gross body sagging. With a mighty effort Ferronius lifted it high in the air and hurled it down—down among the lions.

And, as it spread-eagled from his arms, a shattering crash descended upon his head and darkness closed around him.

III

A DAZZLING streak of lightning, a mighty clap of thunder, and Paul Feron, suddenly awakened, sprang to his feet with white face and staring eyes. What had happened? God, what had happened?

He pushed back the wet hair from his forehead as a hand grasped his shoulder and shook him roughly.

"Here, what's the matter with you, sitting out in the pouring rain?" a voice said. "Been drinking too much hootch? I've a mind to run you in, I have!"

Paul smiled feebly at the policeman.

"It's all right, officer. I was dead beat when I came in here. Heat got me, I guess. Thank the Lord for the rain!"

The policeman nodded.

"Yep, heat wave's broke at last, and just about time. There's more nutty people around the town than I ever saw before. Had about all I could stand of it."

He strolled away. Paul looked at his watch. He had been away from the office four hours. Incredible! Well, he must get back at once; but where was his hat? Surely he had it when he came into the park.

Then he remembered that there was no office to go back to. What he must do was go home to Beth and tell her all that had happened.

How queer he felt! It seemed as if he was some one else—not Paul Feron at all. Well, that fearful pressure on his head had gone. He was wet through, but it was cooler, and that was the great thing, after all.

He hurried to the Subway and caught a train uptown. Every one was talking to every one else, thankful for the blessed relief from the burning sun, and exchanging tales of the great heat wave which had broken at last.

They did not seem real to him, somehow. They were like people in a dream; but Beth would be real. He had a great longing to see Beth, to hold her close, close to him.

Up the stairs to his apartment he raced two steps at a time. At the sound of his key in the lock Beth was at the door. She was as pale as death, and her eyes were red-rimmed.

"Paul, Paul!" she gasped. "Where have you been? I thought you weren't coming back to me at all. I thought you had—"

Paul laughed as he held out a wet arm.

"Taking a rain bath in the park," he said.

"Oh, Paul, don't you understand—about Mr. Behren? You shouldn't be here!"

"What do you mean? I don't know anything. I've been sitting in the park for four hours."

"But, Paul"—her voice wavered and broke—"you were seen coming out of the office just an hour ago, they say, and your hat was there in Mr. Behren's room. He was found strangled—choked to death! And oh, Paul, Paul, the police are here waiting for you!"

He stared at her with horror in his eyes.

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